

Emergency Preparedness and Response

We cannot assume that we can prevent all acts of terror and therefore must also prepare to minimize the damage and recover from attacks that do occur. As September 11 showed, the consequences of terrorism can be far-reaching and diverse. The Department of Homeland Security would ensure the preparedness of our nation's emergency response professionals, provide the federal government's response, and aid America's recovery from terrorist attacks and natural disasters.

To fulfill these missions, the Department of Homeland Security would build upon the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) as one of its key components. It would continue FEMA's efforts to reduce the loss of life and property and to protect our nation's institutions from all types of hazards through a comprehensive, risk-based, all-hazards emergency management program of preparedness, mitigation, response, and recovery. And it will continue to change the emergency management culture from one that reacts to terrorism and other disasters, to one that proactively helps communities and citizens avoid becoming victims.

In terms of preparedness, the Department would assume authority over federal grant programs for local and state first responders such as firefighters, police, and emergency medical personnel. Various offices in the Department of Justice, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency currently manage those programs. In addition, the Department would develop and manage a national training and evaluation system to design curriculums, set standards, evaluate, and reward performance in local, state, and federal training efforts.

The Department would continue FEMA's practice of focusing on risk mitigation in advance of emergencies by promoting the concept of disaster-resistant communities. It would continue current federal support for local government efforts that promote structures and communities that have a reduced chance of being impacted by disasters. It would bring together private industry, the insurance sector, mortgage lenders, the real estate industry, homebuilding associations, citizens, and others to create model communities in high-risk areas.

The Department would have responsibility for federal emergency response efforts. It would lead our national response to a biological attack, direct the Nuclear Emergency Search Teams, Radiological Emergency Response Team, Radiological Assistance Program, Domestic Emergency Support Team, National Pharmaceutical Stockpile, and the National Disaster Medical System, and manage the Metropolitan Medical Response System. The Department would also coordinate the involvement of other federal response assets such as the National Guard in the event of a major incident.

The consequences of a terrorist attack are wide-ranging and can include: loss of life and health, destruction of families, fear and panic, loss of confidence in government, destruction of property, and disruption of commerce and financial markets. The Department would lead federal efforts to promote recovery from terrorist attacks and natural disasters. The Department would maintain FEMA's procedures for aiding recovery from natural and terrorist disasters.

Incident Management. The Department would work with federal, state, and local public safety organizations to build a comprehensive national incident management system for response to terrorist incidents and natural disasters. This system would clarify and streamline federal incident management procedures, eliminating the artificial distinction between "crisis management" and "consequence management." The Department would consolidate existing federal government emergency response plans – namely the Federal Response Plan, the National Contingency Plan, the U.S. government Interagency Domestic Terrorism Concept of Operations Plan, and the Federal Radiological Emergency Response Plan – into one genuinely all-hazard plan. In time of emergency, the Department would manage and coordinate federal entities supporting local and state emergency response efforts.

Interoperable Communications. In the aftermath of any major terrorist attack, emergency response efforts would likely involve hundreds of offices from across the government and the country. It is crucial for response personnel to have and use equipment and systems that allow them to communicate with one another. The current system has not yet supplied the emergency response community with the technology that it needs for this mission. The new Department of Homeland Security would make this a top priority.